# Prompted Pasts: Illustration, Heritage, and AI

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Keynote Presentation at *Prompted Pasts: Visuelle Geschichtsdarstellungen zwischen Illustration und KI*

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*In her Keynote presentation, Rachel Emily Taylor begins by defining 'illustration' and 'heritage', exploring their overlaps and sympathies. She advances the proposition that illustration constitutes a significant investigative strategy within heritage practice. This argument is developed through the discussion of selected case studies, including her own practice, and that of illustrators Serena Katt, Amy Goodwin, Miriam Elgon, Laura Copsey, and Philip Crewe. The presentation concludes by revisiting the relationship between the two fields, situating it within contemporary debates on artificial intelligence, a central theme of the conference. In doing so, Taylor interrogates whether AI (Artificial Intelligence) might be a manifestation of 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' (AHD) and questions how that can be interpreted in relation to the role of the illustrator.*

Illustration and heritage, heritage and illustration, heritage illustration, illustrating heritage.

These two distinct disciplines are often perceived as separate practices but there are many overlaps and sympathies. Illustration is, arguably, very much part of the heritage process. Heritage can act illustratively. Heritage can be an illustration and vice versa. The lines between the two are blurred and, what's more, there can be an overlap.

This keynote presentation will position the role of the illustrator as a 'critical figure in the heritage process';[1] as one who can present institutional critique, activate an archive or collection, craft new heritage, engage new audiences, and challenge dominant institutional narratives. These are ideas that I have published in my book *Illustration and Heritage*, where I explore how

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1 Peter Howard, 'Editorial: Heritage and Art', International Journal of Heritage Studies, 2, 4, (1998), pp.61–3, p.61.

illustration can play an important role in heritage-making – whether in museums, archives, graphic novels, exhibitions, and more.

For the benefit of speakers and attendees, I will start by defining both practices separately, and then draw the two together, exploring how one might illuminate the other. I will then talk through a number of illustration projects to give examples of how the role of the illustrator might function in heritage-making. I will conclude in the presentation on touching on AI – questioning if it might function as a form of Authorised Heritage Discourse.

It is worth noting my position: I am an academic based in the United Kingdom, and this – along with current practice and legal frameworks – will shape my perspective.

## Defining Illustration

Illustration is a practice that has been hard to define. In my own practice and teaching, I have often described it as 'slippery', as it is hard to pin down. Often, it relies on the relationship between text and image to communicate a narrative, which may be fiction or non-fiction. It has been described as 'difficult to distinguish'[2] and the 'critical discourse is limited'.[3] When discussing illustration, academics often start by examining the origins of the word to unpick the discipline, noting that it stems from the Latin *illustrare*, a verb, referring to activities such as 'illuminating, and also encircling and traversing'.[4] To 'illustrate' suggests an action or process, rather than just the final work, and this perspective can open up the discipline.

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2 Catrin Morgan, *A Taxonomy of Deception* (Royal College of Art, 2014), p.18.
3 Stephanie Black, *Illumination through Illustration* (doctoral thesis, Kingston School of Art, 2014), p.5.
4 Black, *Illumination through Illustration*, p.5.

I propose that illustration can be an action (verb) as well as an outcome (noun). When considered in this way, we can view illustration as an act that is not defined by a medium. Illustration can be a method employed within other practices, such as painting and drawing. It is a 'fugitive'[5] process that spills into other fields and often goes undetected. What's more, it can be difficult to distinguish illustration from both graphic design and fine art, as it can reasonably reside in both, as these disciplines can both act illustratively.[6]

In general, illustration can be perceived as having two strands of practice: commercial and authorial. Commercially, it is a brief-led practice, often seen as representational images that have been made in relation to a text for a commercial application. The other strand, authorial practice, is often self-directed, and exists without the influence of a client.

The slippery nature of illustration stems from the fact that it can become a process, method, or action that occurs within other disciplines. For example, an artist, performer, or designer can use the functions of illustration in their work, without being a self-defined illustrator.

In my book, *Illustration and Heritage* (Bloomsbury, 2024), I proposed that we consider it as such:

> **Illustration (noun)** is a tangible and final outcome. It can be a commercial practice, but it is not limited to this. The work can rely on a relationship with a client or agent.

5 Catrin Morgan, keynote, 'Bodies in Spaces', Illustration Research Methods Symposium, Kingston University (February 2021).
6 This is a view that I have witnessed in the art school, but also in the humanities, literature, and media.

The work is often considered as an application in publishing, advertising, packaging. But it can also be self-directed and autonomous.

Illustrative (verb) is an intangible process that can take place within multiple disciplines and practices. An artwork, design, performance, image, or object can act illustratively. It is a process that occurs between the viewer/reader and the object/image, whether intended or not.

I encourage you to keep this definition in mind during this presentation and throughout the remainder of the conference.

## Defining Heritage

Now we have explored illustration, we can look at heritage. Heritage is an act that we do to preserve the past, it takes place in the present, and it is for the future. It is a 'process'[7] that is not inert.[8] We engage with it, rework it, appropriate it. It is part of the way identities are constructed.[9] Heritage reveals what we perceive to have value and how we want to be remembered by the things that we leave behind. Through the heritage process, we are assembling future worlds.[10]

It can be thought of as both tangible and intangible. Tangible heritage includes artefacts, archaeological sites, monuments – objects we can touch. Intangible heritage consists of folklore, skills, stories, rituals – things that do not necessarily have a physical presence. In the heritage industry,[11] more

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7 David Harvey, 'Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents: Temporality, Meaning and the Scope of Heritage Studies', International Journal of Heritage Studies, 7, 4, (2010), pp.319–38, p. 320.
8 John Turnbridge and Gregory Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1995), p.6.
9 Barbara Bender, 'Introduction: Landscape, Meaning and Action', in *Landscapes: Politics and Perspectives*, ed. by Barbara Bender (Oxford: Berg, 1993), p.3.
10 Rodney Harrison, *Heritage Futures: Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural* (London: UCL Press, 2020).
11 I am using this term, rather than 'heritage sector', to be provocative and to tie the discussion to ideas of economy, organisations, services. The 'heritage industry' was a term coined by Robert

value is often perceived to be placed on tangible objects, as they can be easier to preserve and house in collections, archives, and museums.

Heritage is not history. History seeks truth. Heritage 'uses historical traces and tells historical tales'[12] that can exaggerate and exclude. A historian aims to reduce bias in their retelling of the past, whereas heritage can enforce it. Heritage is representational; it depicts recreations and reproductions of the past, of societies and cultures. Heritage is performative; it can involve re-enactment, rituals, actors, and audiences.[13]

In *Uses of Heritage*, Laurajane Smith writes that heritage is an 'act of communication'.[14] She uses an example of giving her daughter her grandmother's necklace – a family heirloom – and that the real sense of heritage is in the act of passing on and receiving the memories and the stories that encompass the necklace. We then use and shape these stories to make sense of who we are and who we want to be. Smith describes the necklace as a 'prop' for heritage-making. She places importance on the intangibility of heritage and does not dismiss the tangible, but 'deprivileges'[15] it. The places, sites, and objects that are selected as heritage are deemed as 'significant' and 'meaningful' by experts.

Hewinson in the 1980s, and it was used to refer to the heritage sector in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It was also used by Stuart Hall to describe the heritage sector in his keynote speech at the national conference 'Whose Heritage? The Impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain's Living Heritage' in November 1999.

12 David Lowenthal, 'Fabricating Heritage', *History & Memory*, 10, 1 (1998), pp.5–24, p.7–8.
13 Michael Haldrup and Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt, 'Heritage as Performance', *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research* (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2015), pp.52–68.
14 Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006), p.2.
15 Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, p. 3.

The past is labelled as 'heritage' when it is selected to become part of the conservation and management of the heritage industries. These choices in themselves are a cultural process, and this curation of material treasures[16] reflects contemporary values, social debates, and aspirations, rather than those of the past.[17] In the museum, these artefacts are the subject of museological interpretation, and heritage practitioners form a dialogue with an artefact to aid the communication of history (examples being museum captions, guides, and tours). This entails curating a version of history that has been constructed with the fragments[18] that remain of the past.

Heritage is a political act. Museums have a history of colonialism, and still 'retain two basic competencies' left over from colonial times – 'they collect and they exhibit'.[19] In the present day, discussions are ongoing over repatriation of museum artefacts and requests for human remains to be laid to rest (Parthenon Marbles, Benin Bronzes, the Hottentot Venus, Ramses Mummy, Nefertiti's Bust, the Louvre's Egyptian Frescos, to name a few). The publication of *the Association of Critical Heritage Studies manifesto* (2012) sought to challenge industry practitioners to 'invite the active participation of people and communities who to date have been marginalised in the creation and management of "heritage".'[20] Heritage is a way of seeing the past – it is a 'gaze'[21] – and when marginalised communities are included, those that have been gazed upon can gaze back, and interact with the process.

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16 Items in museum, gallery, and archive collections.
17 Harvey, 'Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents', p.320.
18 I am referring to artefacts, recordings, memory, and testimony.
19 Susan Ashley, 'First Nations on View: Canadian Museums and Hybrid Representations of Culture', *eTopia* (2005), pp.31–40, p.32.
20 Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell, *Association of Critical Heritage Studies Manifesto* (2012). <https://www.criticalheritagestudies.org/history> [accessed 13 November 2022].
21 John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Society* (London: Sage, 1990).

Heritage is a discourse. Heritage is a form of knowledge, expertise, and power relations that are imbedded in language. Smith developed the term 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' (or, simply, AHD in heritage literature) to describe the self-referential discourse used in professional heritage practices. Authorised Heritage Discourse can privilege certain narratives linked to nationhood, can naturalise[22] cultural and social experience, and places undue importance on 'things'. An example of this is museum captions, which may include 'statements by artists or critics, but their voice is the singular, disembodied voice of the museum'.[23] This is 'Authorised Heritage Discourse'.

## Heritage and Illustration

We can consider heritage in relationship to illustration, exploring the overlaps, and environments where they both exist together. In semantic terms, it has been argued that 'heritage is without definition'[24] and it presents itself as it splits in two – resulting in a duality, both tangible and intangible – when it is applied. This can be compared to illustration, which itself can be perceived as both a noun (an illustration, tangible) and a verb (the illustrative process, intangible). Like heritage, illustration can be regarded not only as an object, but also as the story that surrounds an object. If we recall Smith's metaphor of her grandmother's necklace, 'heritage' is the story that encompasses the object; the necklace itself is not heritage but is an aide-mémoire that embodies a narrative, which has a specific audience. Can we frame illustration using the same metaphor?

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22 'Naturalise' is a term used by heritage academics to describe how Authorised Heritage Discourse neutralises particular cultural frameworks as 'universal'.

23 Salwa Nashashibi, 'Visitor Voices in Art Museums: The Visitor-Written Label', *The Journal of Museum Education*, 28, 3, (2003), pp.21–5, p.21.

24 Robert Hewinson, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (North Yorkshire: Methuen Publishing, 1987), p. 31.

There may also be a comparison to be made between expertise in both practices. In *A Taxonomy of Deception*, Catrin Morgan proposes illustration to be a practice that can be employed by anyone, rather than a discipline reserved only for 'experts', and this can also be applied to the heritage sector. Although it is labelled, named, and defined by industry specialists, thus becoming part of Authorised Heritage Discourse, heritage is not always practiced by experts and, even though these 'inexpert' moments can be overlooked, they are still heritage.

Museum curation relies on the relationship between text and image, which communicates a story that enables us to imagine a specific past, as constructed by the institution. This is comparable to how illustrations can function. Illustrators can also gather fragments (be it photographs, testimonies, or archival documentation) that they then synthesise and place adjacent to one another to reconstruct the past.

Illustration and heritage do not always depict a truthful representation of history. Morgan writes that, often, illustration is expected to have 'a duty to the truth of the text' however, this is not always the case, as it does not need to be 'mimetic, submissive, or even honest in order for it to be enlightening'.[25] If we bear this in mind, then an Illustration might not be honest when depicting historical moments. Instead, illustration acts like heritage and tells a historical story.

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25 Morgan, *A Taxonomy of Deception*, p.18.

Illustration and heritage can illuminate historical narratives. When working with history, I regard the illustrator with the metaphor of a 'prism', one that light shines through, but which can never be fully removed from the work as it forms a refraction of another's voice or story. The idea of refraction leads us to question the positionality and moral implications of the illustrator. Their work is not authorless and the histories they are adapting should be treated with care.

Illustration and heritage can erase experiences. An illustrator can choose to highlight certain narratives and voices in their work. Comparable to forms of empathy, these chosen narratives can be perceived as 'biased', 'short-sighted',[26] and can lead to over-identification. Both heritage and illustration can favour the narrative of the individual over the many and create a 'spotlight effect'.[27] In theatre, a spotlight can highlight one person and leave the remainder of the stage in darkness, but, if a number of spotlights are arranged to combine multiple beams, the light can also flood the stage so that the full performance is visible. The diameter of the beam can be used as a metaphor for the illustrator's practice and what effect it can have. If highlighting certain narratives means that other stories are at risk of being forgotten, should an illustrator use their practice to bring less well-known histories to light?

Both illustration and heritage are entwined with notions of representation, of showing and portraying. Representation is not a presence but a re-

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26 Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (London: Bodley Head, 2006), p.16.
27 Thomas Gilovich et al., 'The spotlight effect in social judgment: An egocentric bias in estimates of the salience of one's own actions and appearance', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 2, (2000), pp. 211–222.

presence,[28] such as a translation or interpretation, which is never truly objective. There are issues between the notions of 'speaking for' and 'portraying' another in both practices. It is assumed that illustration relies on the idea that we can make things visible and depict them, but, when working with heritage, it can also be used to highlight absences and act as a negative space.

Even now, there are ongoing debates regarding the moral and ethical responsibility of institutions. Heritage practitioners and institutions are bound by national laws and international conventions. The International Council of Museums, American Alliance of Museums, and the Museums Association have published texts that outline ethical guidelines for museums.[29] As parallels are drawn between both fields, I would argue that the same considerations are applied to illustration when representing heritage and the past.

## The Illustrator in the Heritage Process

To examine this relationship further, I will present case studies of my own work and others, to explore how illustration is a fundamental process in heritage-making.

The illustrator could take on different positions in the retelling of history, such as subject, director, inventor, or assembler. I will now explore each of these roles alongside examples of practitioner's work.

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28 At the 2020 Association of Critical Heritage Studies conference, I gave a collaborative presentation with Leah Fusco, titled '*Re'-: Methods of Illustration Practice in Heritage*, and the paper explored these ideas, including how the practice could be framed as a '*re*-turn, *re*-visit, *re*-imagine, *re*-voice, *re*-assemble, re-presentation, *re*-enactment'.
29 the Museum Association, 'Code of Ethics for Museums' <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/code-of-ethics/#> [accessed 20 December 2022]

## Illustrator as *Subject*

Illustrators can approach history through the personal, focusing on their own family biography or experiences. They can embed themselves within the narrative, as a character or a narrator. The illustrator's family relationships may allow for a connection to a historical story, which could imply that they are a more reliable and authentic narrator.

There are many examples of the use of an illustrator's family history in graphic novels. This medium allows illustrators to use a sequential narrative to tell a story, through the interplay of text and images. Chen Jianghong's *Mao and Me* (2008) tells the story of Chairman Mao and the proclamation of the Cultural Revolution, which is narrated from Jianghong's perspective as a child. Nora Krug's graphic memoir *Heimat* (2018) investigates her family's experience under the Nazi regime, and charts her journey back to Germany. In her work *Sunday's Child* (2019), Serena Katt tells the story of Nazi Germany through her grandfather's experiences and memories. However, the work questions whether this 'optimistic story'[30] of her grandfather as a young boy in the Hitler Youth is entirely truthful. Throughout the story, Katt uses a second voice, her own, that fills in omitted details, questions his recollections, and interrogates his version of events.

*Sunday's Child* is an example of how an illustrator might approach telling a historical story: a family member acts as an anchor to a historical time and allows the illustrator to position themselves in the narrative. Instinctively, when drafting *Sunday's Child*, Katt said she 'zoomed in and out of the

30 Serena Katt, Sunday's Child (2019) <www.serenakatt.co.uk/BOOKS-1> [accessed 10 April 2022]

images',[31] both visually through making, but also metaphorically, and that act could be perceived as representing the shift in her relationship to her grandfather's story. The use of magnification in the reinterpretation of archival images can be compared to the spotlight effect of empathy. But the act of cropping, repositioning, and zooming also illustrates Katt's own emotional journey in processing the diary. Readers have noted that the work allowed them to reflect – and to question 'what would [they] have done?'[32] if they had been in the same situation.

## Illustrator as *Director*

Illustrators can distance themselves from their version of history. Rather than drawing on their own family history, experiences, and memories, as a subject or actor within their portrayal, they can be metaphorically positioned behind the stage as a director. For example, working with actors or participants in the portrayal of a historical story, rather than their own family members.

This is how I, myself, tend to work when undertaking residencies at museums. I often work with groups of people using illustration as a method to explore a collective response to a museum, collection, or historical narrative. I facilitate the workshops as if I am a director 'blocking'[33] a scene. Often taking elements from the workshops, as if artefacts, and integrate the material into larger installations.

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31 Serena Katt cited Rachel Emily Taylor *Illustration and Heritage* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024) p. 56.
32 Rachel Cooke, 'Sunday's Child by Serena Katt review – war, propaganda and collective blindness', Guardian, 30 April 2019 <www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/30/sundays-child-serena-katt-graphic-novel-review> [accessed 13 November 2022].
33 'Blocking' is a term used in theatre to describe a practice in the rehearsal process when the director determines where the actors should move on stage to ensure the sightlines for the audience, and to ensure that the actor is always lit, according to the lighting design of the scene.

An example of my practice is my residency at the Foundling Museum in London. A 'Foundling' means an abandoned child or infant who is cared for by others, and the museum was based on the story of the Foundling Hospital, which was established in the 1700s. But I noticed that it was the only the biographies of adults that were represented in the museum – the mothers, the foundling's masters, hospital governors, donors, or the foundlings as adults – but never the biographies of children.

Through my practice, I attempted to draw attention to what was missing: the historical foundling children from the 1700s, which I explored through the facilitation of workshops with contemporary children. Illustration became a method for the children to articulate their response to the narratives in the museum when they couldn't always communicate through language. In this example, illustration becomes a research tool within heritage.

The paintings from the workshops were later integrated into an installation, *Kept Within the Bounds* (2016), which was exhibited in the museum. A visitor commented installation, it reminded her of her children and it 'pulled on the heartstrings'.[34] The familiarity of the displayed items allowed visitors to draw on their own experiences of contemporary children (observations of children and memories of their own childhoods) and then relate these to the historical foundlings, enabling the audience to consider the work in relation to the present and future.

Illustrator as *Inventor*

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34 Unnamed visitor to the Foundling Museum, conversation with Rachel Emily Taylor, October 2016.

The lives and voices that the illustrator includes in their work are not always factual or truthful. Illustrator Laura Copsey collaborated with Philip Crewe for the Engine House Residency (2021) at the new site of the Quentin Blake Centre of Illustration. The site – a 300-year-old former waterworks at the New River Head in London. The residency brief states that the institution's aims were to 'collaborate with different people to learn and share the site's stories'.[35] As part of their response to the brief, they invented historical characters to help them in their retelling of history.

The illustrative objects made by Copsey and Crewe were laid on a curved table that was built for the space, they were also numbered, with a print-out that included further information and captions. Amongst the objects on display, there was a replica mummers mask,[36] a ceramic tankard made with London clay, and a bottle of New River water turned into ale. The curatorial strategy was comparable to that of a traditional museum display, although there was no glass vitrine preventing the objects from being touched – even so, I did not witness any visitor handling the items.

Laura Copsey and Philip Crewe sought to 'visualise' historical people from the New River Head, but rather than creating figurative representations, they did this by making objects that they might have owned or used. It is through these objects, almost like a conduit, that these characters could be perceived as being made visible. But they are not fully present.

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35 House of Illustration [Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration], *Engine House offsite Residency 2021: Brief and Guidelines* (unpublished, 2021).
36 A 'mummers mask' is worn by an actor in a folk play, or mummers' play, and it is a tradition in the British Isles.

New River Folk provides an alternative to Authorised Heritage Discourse, as Copsey and Crewe play with familiar museological formats and subvert them. They challenge the function of curatorial practice as a form of storytelling, placing 'people who do not appear in "official" museums'[37] at the centre of their narrative.

## Illustrator as *Assembler*

Illustrators gather and interpret historical traces. This process could be compared to archaeologists, who wash, sort, catalogue, and store artefacts that they recover from sites, before using them to piece together information about the past. The illustrator might work with an archive or collection in the creation of their work and synthesise material into their practice.

Miriam Elgon's working process acts as a 'mesh' that weaves historical moments together to allow for a reader to experience a sense of the time, but a sense that is not necessarily accurate. Her picturebook, *Pablo Fanque's Circus Royal*, uses drawing and image-making to tell an alternative version of the past, raising an otherwise overlooked historical figure into the foreground. For the work, she conducted research in the National Fairground and Circus Archive.

When I interviewed her, she said she was led by the questions 'how do you visualise things that you've never seen? How do you visualise somewhere that you can't go?' and engaged in an 'extensive, elaborate "piecing together"' that 'creates a real feeling of time and place, but real in the sense that it's evocative, not necessarily accurate'.

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37 Olivia Ahmad, Laura Copsey and Philip Crewe, caption accompanying the New River Folk exhibition.

Filling the 'Gaps'

During my research for the book, *Illustration and Heritage*, and subsequent conference of the same name, I found that certain words kept on appearing in conversations, notably, the word 'gaps', which I wanted to pull out and draw attention to today.

Illustrator Laura Copsey said, "history is always a story that can be interpreted. We are interested in the gaps in a history, and how we might speculate to fill those gaps," and her collaborator, Philip Crewe added, "History is constantly being rewritten as it's so much about what we see in it today. We found the three characters inspiring, and the 'gaps' sparked conversations between us that we then filled with work that flowed from that inspiration".

But Illustrators do not always speculatively fill these 'gaps'. It can also be important to leave space where there were gaps in the historical record and using our practice to draw attention to what is missing. That is how my practice functioned at the Foundling Museum – I constructed a space that was 'half-built' that allowed an audience to fill the 'gaps' with their imagination.

Illustrator Amy Goodwin used her practice to focus on the role of fairground females in the twentieth century, particularly those that had not been given the historical attention she felt they deserved. Goodwin aimed to illustratively tell stories about the lives of specific fairground females: Lizzie, Martha, Sophie, Annie, and Elizabeth (the project also includes a non-human female, Lizzie, who was an elephant). In the project, she said, 'it was

important to leave space where there were gaps in the historical record that I hadn't been able to fill, and they were still visible as gaps – effectively, giving space to the absences, making the absences visible.'

## Illustration, Heritage, and AI

*Prompted Pasts* asks questions, such as, 'with the widespread availability of AI, will the visualisation of history change'? How might this new tool impact how we 'fill the gaps' of history? This led me to consider the relationship between illustration, heritage, and AI, which I will touch upon to close this keynote talk.

Although I don't cover this topic in my book, which I finished writing in 2022, being invited to speak at this event led me to consider the relationship between illustration, heritage, and AI, which I will touch upon to close this keynote talk. Again, it is worth noting that I am speaking from the position of an illustration academic based in the UK.

This notion of a 'prompt' could be compared to an illustrator's 'brief'. Although AI responds to the prompts by matching patterns, and anticipating what is expected, the illustrator brings lived experience. The idea of a 'prompt' suggests that someone is doing the prompting, but who is prompting these visions of a speculative past?

Who has the power when directing this visualisation of history?

A question I want to leave with you all is: 'is AI a form of Authorised Heritage Discourse if it is not used ethically and critically?'

Authorised Heritage Discourse draws together multiple institutional, expert, and political perspectives into a single, authoritative narrative. An example of this is captions or audio tours, which may include 'statements by artists or critics, but their voice is the single, disembodied voice of the museum'.[38] This unified 'voice' may not reveal its sources and is often in a position of power and expertise. It re-establishes an elite viewpoint or national identity through the representation of the past and can alienate a range of other social experiences. It can naturalise and reduce variety into a singular narrative.

AI is trained on vast datasets drawn from multiple sources (such as texts, images, archives, articles, and other cultural material) and synthesises these into a singular, persuasive voice. Comparable to Authorised Heritage Discourse, an AI-generated voice appears neutral and authoritative, even though it is shaped by selection biases, omissions, and the patterns embedded in the training data. These biases are often Eurocentric and built with 'stolen' material amalgamated without the author's consent, not dissimilar to stolen loot held in museums, which are built on a colonial legacy.

If employed in a museum or archive, AI reconstructions (of voices, characters, or buildings, for example) could be perceived as truth. Its sources, processes, and authorship may be hidden, which means it may be harder to interrogate. AI might also 'hallucinate' and make mistakes, inventing details that look convincing. This is especially risky in heritage where stakes include cultural memory, identity, trust, and care.

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38 Salwa Nashashibi, 'Visitor Voices in Art Museums: The Visitor-Written Label', *The Journal of Museum Education*, 28, 3, 2003, 21–5, p. 21.

Perhaps we can apply literature from Authorised Heritage Discourse to our critique of AI when it is employed in heritage practices.

In their article 'Constrained by Commonsense: The Authorized Heritage Discourse in Contemporary Debates' (2012), Laurajane Smith and Emma Waterton explore the ways in which the multiplicity of the meaning of heritage is overshadowed, so much so that a particular idea about 'heritage' has come to represent the dominant and legitimized way of thinking, writing, and talking about heritage management practices. This is what we should be wary of with the integration of AI, particularly if it draws from 'dominant' ways of talking about 'heritage'.

In comparison, the illustrator – who is often a named practitioner – can provide an alternative, critical 'voice' to Authorised Heritage Discourse and AI (in its current form). The illustrator is not always framed as an 'expert', and whose processes are – arguably – 'visible'. Through their involvement, it can add to the multiplicity of meaning as it allows for an audience to imagine a version of history and 'fill in the gaps' in their imagination.

Illustration may not be able to construct a 'truthful' reconstruction of the past, but that doesn't mean there less value in the work.

For example, my project at the Foundling Museum didn't recover the missing historical child's voice, but it drew attention to what was lacking, what had not been recorded, and what wasn't displayed in the museum, and it allowed an audience to reflect on what was absent. The illustrations did not masquerade as a relic from the past.

Recently, I have seen how AI is being used to bring the dead back to life, without their consent, in what is called a 'deep fake'. This is morally troubling, particularly when these AI-generated images and videos are presented as *truth*. This is an uncanny space of ventriloqual puppeteering where the past is recycled and reused – and the dead cannot object.

Despite growing ethical and social concerns, deepfakes remain largely unregulated in the UK, with only limited oversight through existing legal frameworks.

What questions should we ask ourselves when using this technology as a tool to visualise the past? How should we be respecting the legacies of people who lived before us? And how do we want to be remembered when we are gone?

To close this keynote, I want to refer to Walter Benjamin's description of Paul Klee's painting, *Angelus Novus* (1920), as 'the angel of history'. This idea is what I will leave you with, and it is how I propose we consider the role of the illustrator when working with heritage:

> An angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back

is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[39]

The image suggests a struggle against the linear order of time and, perhaps, history itself. The angel is 'caught' between the past and future, and there is a push and pull to either side. The angel is still moving forward, but also looks back towards what has been. When considered a part of the heritage process, the illustrator navigates multiple states of time – as the angel does – and there is a balance to be made between them. A historical narrative can help us to understand our present day and our journey toward the future. The angel's face, 'turned toward the past', and movement forward, can help us to understand the illustrator's metaphorical position in relation to time. The illustrator working with history could be considered as a protector or messenger, one that guides people 'through ambiguous moral spaces'.[40]

The illustrator can be a 'critical figure in the heritage process'.

Illustration can also be *critical* due to its importance as a communication method in heritage, apparent in the labelling, narrativizing, and interpretation of history. It has a natural place in heritage-making.

Illustration can play a vital role in heritage, drawing attention to the 'gaps' in history – the stories of people who aren't necessarily found in the material culture that is preserved in museums and archives, which are often

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39 Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp.257-8. [Über den Begriff der Geschichte, 1940.]
40 Darryl Clifton cited Emily Taylor, *Illustration and Heritage* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024) p. 29.

dominated by a white male elite. Through illustration, we can find another way to address what is missing, whilst also not 'pretending' to be truth.